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ABSTRACT

This study examines the excessive turnover rate of school superintendents in rural school districts in Oklahoma from the school board perspective. Researchers identified 41 schools that had three or more superintendents in the last 5 years, and had 600 or less students. Telephone interviews of 25 school board presidents focused on personal and board related demographics, community special interest groups, critical problems between the board and superintendent, reasons for the superintendent turnover, and any established criteria for the hiring of new superintendents. The following areas were identified as critical problems that existed between the board and any of the previous superintendents: (1) finance, primarily poor management of funds; (2) integrity, from theft to lying to the board; (3) poor communication skills; and (4) immorality, such as extramarital affairs. Forty-three percent of the 63 superintendents who left the district were either terminated or forced to resign. Twenty-three percent resigned to accept a position in a larger district or one which paid more. The majority of school boards alone interviewed the superintendents, and did not question the applicant's former district or community. Often, inappropriate interview questions were asked, and the "good ol' boy" system used. To increase needed stability in school districts, boards must be more investigative in the hiring process, and state agencies must adopt a proactive attitude to address the issue of ineffective administrators. (KS)

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ADMINISTRATOR STABILITY IN RURAL SCHOOLS:
THE SCHOOL BOARD FACTOR

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of a study of school districts that have experienced an excessive turnover of school superintendents. School board presidents in each of the involved school districts were interviewed. The board presidents identified issues relating to finance, integrity, morality, communication, and personnel as the primary reasons for the high rate of superintendent turnover.

ADMINISTRATOR STABILITY IN RURAL SCHOOLS:
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Rural schools in America are confronted with a great many issues ranging from inadequate finances to increased state mandates and educational requirements to heightened parental and community expectations. Many of the constraints that potentially inhibit the ability of rural schools to provide an education to all children can be overcome, provided the school staff and administrators are dedicated to excellence.

The reform decade of the 1980's reinforced the assertion that schools must have effective, proactive administrators to achieve established educational goals (Edmonds, 1979; Leithwood & Montgomery, 1986; Manasse, 1985). Leaders, in order to be effective, must be provided both the opportunity and an appropriate amount of time to accomplish district goals. Yet, excessive turmoil in the school district can detract from the espoused purpose of educating youth. That turmoil may be the result of several diverse factors but when the conflict revolves around the school's leadership, the result can be demoralizing. Without a degree of stability in the district's leadership, little can be accomplished effectively. A constant and consistent upheaval in the leadership of a school creates a sense of organizational disequilibrium that hampers the total functioning of the organization (Getzels and Guba, 1957).

Purpose of the Study

The most generally accepted view of school district administration is that the board of education should legislate policies and appraise the results and that the superintendent should serve as the chief executive who implements these policies (Hunkins, 1949). This simplistic view of the relationship between the superintendent and school board rarely exists in the real world. Indeed, the relationship today between the board and the superintendent often reflects a high degree of conflict and uneasiness (Bailey, 1982; Shannon, 1989; Wildman, 1987). This relationship of conflict and mistrust results in a high rate of turnover in the superintendency (Grady and Bryant, 1989; Hosman, 1989).

It is the extreme rate of turnover in the superintendency that concerns these researchers. An exploration of critical incidents between the board and the superintendent from the superintendent's perspective was more than adequately addressed by Grady and Bryant (1989). The purpose for conducting this study was to ascertain the reasons for excessive superintendent turnover in schools from the school board perspective. A further intent was to determine what contributed to this constant level of change in the superintendency in the identified school districts.

Procedures

To obtain the information needed to answer the questions addressed in this study, it was necessary to ascertain which school districts had experienced an excessive turnover in the superintendency. An excessive turnover would be ascribed to any district that had three or more superintendents within the last five years. It was also decided to utilize only those districts that had 600 or less students. State Department of Education directories were consulted and 41 schools were identified as meeting the research criteria. The 41 schools were rural and generally not near any urban community.

State school board records were then utilized to identify the school board presidents of the 41 districts. Letters were sent to each school board president asking them to participate in the study. Twenty-five (61%) board presidents consented to be interviewed while five indicated they did not desire to participate. Eleven did not respond to the initial request or any of the follow-up requests.

After establishing an acceptable interview time with each board president, telephone interviews were conducted. The interviews focused on personal and board related demographics, community special interest groups, critical problems between the board and superintendent, reasons for the superintendent turnover, and any established criteria for the hiring of new superintendents. All of the

interviewees were open, candid, and even pleased that someone was interested in their views.

Both researchers reviewed the collected data and identified the commonly stated reasons for the high rate of superintendent turnover. The results of the interviews are reported in the following section.

Results

An overview of the general demographics reported by the respondents found that 72% of the school board presidents were male and 60% fell within the 41-50 age group. The majority of the respondents (56%) were reared in the local community and attended the school in which they served as a board member. Their occupations included rancher/farmer, the oil and gas field, postmaster, carpenter, or engineer. The single largest occupational category was farmers and ranchers with twenty-four percent. Table 1 provides an overview of all the stated board president occupations.

INSERT TABLE 1
ABOUT HERE

Almost all of them had children who either were or had been students in the school. Their tenure on the board ranged from two years to 22 years with an average time of 6.7 years. A majority had worked with two or three superintendents although two indicated they had worked with six superintendents. None of the respondents were minority

members although three boards did have a minority board member. Figure 1 shows the locations of the various school districts.

INSERT FIGURE 1

ABOUT HERE

As can be seen from the figure, the majority of the schools were found in eastern Oklahoma.

When asked why they elected to run for the school board, 20% responded that they were asked to run by neighbors, friends, or teachers. Twenty-eight percent indicated that they ran because they believed the school district was in trouble and needed a new approach to resolving district problems. Thirty-two percent stated they possessed an insight and/or ability that could assist the schools and this was why they chose to run for office. Interestingly, 8% decided to run for the school board in order to keep someone else from being elected. The remainder of the responses represented a variety of individual reasons for seeking the school board position.

When asked about special interest groups and their influence, only two of the respondents indicated the existence of any such group. One special interest group was characterized as being "against everything" and the other group was connected to athletics. Additionally, only 20% of the school districts in the study had an active teachers

organization that negotiated with the school board. One of the schools did have a binding arbitration agreement with the board. Although the power and influence of special interest groups appeared to be minimal, one interviewee reported that the problem with the school was a specific individual in the community who controlled both the board and the superintendent.

Each board president was asked to identify any critical problem that had existed between the board and any of the previous superintendents. Most were able to do so quite readily. The largest percentages of the identified problems related to finance (22.5%), the integrity of the superintendent (20%), personnel issues (17.5%), communication (17.5%), and morality (7.5%). Table 2 provides a summary of the figures.

INSERT TABLE 2

ABOUT HERE

Two board members responded that they just didn't like the superintendent and that created a critical problem. One interviewee observed that the religion of the superintendent caused a problem. Only two of the respondents (5%) failed to identify any critical problem between the board and the superintendent. The vast majority of the critical issues led to a change of the district superintendent.

Finance

Finance (22.5%) was identified as a major problem area for school boards and superintendents. One board member reported that the superintendent had spent all the school district's yearly allocation and that a local bank had to file a lawsuit to recoup its losses. This same superintendent failed to report all of the district encumbrances to the board and the encumbrances were not discovered until the following school year. Another respondent indicated that one of their previous superintendents had purchased "over \$10,000 in supplies" from his daughter who was a distributor of supplies and that the superintendent himself was deeply involved in the same organization. One board president stated that the superintendent had hired too many teachers and had seven coaches on a staff when only two were needed. This action reduced the district cash reserve from \$200,000 to approximately \$4,000 in one year. The board was then forced to develop a reduction in force program in order to avoid bankruptcy. In another rural district, a major financial problem developed when a superintendent who was terminated filed a lawsuit and was awarded a \$40,000 judgment. This necessitated a readjustment of the school district's budget.

Integrity

The second greatest type of response related to the issue of superintendent integrity. Many of the issues concerning integrity had a direct impact on the financial

well being of the school district. The litany of identified problems relating to superintendent integrity ranged from theft to lying to the board. In fact, one board member stated that "experience just gave the superintendent the know-how to legally steal." .

One respondent indicated an administrator had purchased a tobacco license in the name of the school and then utilized the license to purchase his cigarettes. Another board member stated that the superintendent had allowed anyone to charge gas at a local service station simply by indicating the purchase was for school business. This same superintendent often filled his two cars, truck, and boat at the expense of the district until the board stopped the activity. He also typically mailed out school district warrants without school board approval. The board president further stated that the superintendent had frequently utilized an American Express card for purchases and when the board decided to review the charges, it found that many of them "had been bar bills". This superintendent soon left the school for another position.

Another board president reported that one superintendent had the board approve claims from what was discovered to be a nonexistent business. The money amounting to several hundred dollars per month was sent to a false address and later pocketed by the superintendent and placed in his personal checking account. One superintendent who was a hunter had purchased rifles for each board member as an

appreciation gift but failed to advise the board that the purchases had been made with school funds. A board member was especially unhappy at the superintendent who gave himself an unauthorized \$5,000 salary increase.

Many of the interviewees identified financial ability and integrity as the two most important attitudes that superintendents should possess. Several expressed surprise at the dishonesty of some administrators. One board member stated, "I always had held the superintendent in high esteem and I was shocked by his actions of dishonesty." Another individual stated she "thought superintendents were supposed to be educators." An additional board president asserted that "some have lost sight of why they're in education." It was apparent that many board members became overly cautious and critical of their superintendent after an involvement with a dishonest one. One board member acknowledged it was hard to fully trust the current superintendent.

Communication and Personnel Issues

Communication issues and personnel problems were the next most often mentioned areas of concern. One board member asserted that "one superintendent wouldn't tell anyone what was going on. He wanted to do things his own way. He was very set in his ways and wouldn't take suggestions or advice." A respondent observed that since the superintendent would not tell the board what was happening in the school, it forced the board "to delve into the running of the school." Another board member stated that his superintendent

only discussed what he wanted others to know. Several interviewees complained that their superintendent wouldn't admit to making a mistake.

One board member stated that members of the community attended board meetings so they could stay informed. He indicated that superintendent rarely informed the community of anything. Another respondent observed that the superintendent "could talk for 30 to 40 minutes and then the board would have to ask him if that was a yes or a no." At least five of the interviewees characterized a good superintendent as one who would not be aloof or inaccessible to either patrons or the staff. They felt that an important trait for a superintendent was the ability to treat people in a caring manner and the need to do so especially with teachers.

Immorality

A concern for the immoral behavior of the superintendent was expressed by several board members. Issues relating to such matters inevitably led to either the termination or resignation of the superintendent in question. One superintendent, according to a board member, was having an affair with a woman from his previous school district when "her husband came to the board and said he would blow the whistle if they didn't do something." Another superintendent was terminated for having an affair with one of the school's principals. This same superintendent attempted to hire a particular teacher but the board refused

to do so according to the board president because of the superintendent's obvious sexual agenda. Another board member indicated the superintendent had impregnated a high school senior. This superintendent subsequently left his position over the situation. He then divorced his wife, married the student, and currently serves as a superintendent in another district. The issue of morality was important to many of the board members since approximately one third of those interviewed identified the need for superintendents to possess an unrepachable moral attitude.

Resignation/Termination

The twenty-five board presidents interviewed represented districts that had a total of 88 superintendents in the past five years. Forty-three percent of the 63 superintendents who left the districts were either terminated or forced to resign in order to avoid termination. Three (5%) were terminated in the middle of the school year. Twenty-three percent resigned to accept either a position in a larger district or one which paid more. The remainder left their positions for reasons such as health, retirement, or death. One superintendent even became a board member after retiring.

School Board Reactions to Turnovers

The board presidents were asked to describe what steps were established in the hiring of a new superintendent given the nature of past problems. Ninety-two percent admitted that only the board interviewed superintendent applicants. A

few allowed the outgoing superintendent to participate in the interview process. During the interviews the boards generally indicated that characteristics relating to experience, leadership, integrity and financial skills were most actively sought. The education level of the applicant was not a factor in the hiring process. Indeed, one board member was concerned when several individuals with doctorates applied in his district.

Many of the interviewees revealed that the board hired a superintendent based only on his/her interview and how the applicant responded to the board's questions. Only 8% of the board presidents stated that they ever questioned anyone in the applicant's former district or community. Several board members felt that the boards too often asked applicants inappropriate questions. They identified such questions as "Does your daughter play basketball?"; "Are you a Baptist?"; or "Do you bird hunt?" as representing a common approach taken by some boards.

Some of the board presidents asserted that they would investigate future superintendents more thoroughly. One board member stated that the board needed to assess the school district's weaknesses and develop a vision of where they wanted the district headed and then hire the proper person to get them there. One respondent referred to the "good ol' boy" system which often hampered the search for a good leader. Many contended that it was difficult to hire good superintendents unless the boards were able to increase

the salaries offered. This was often difficult to do in small districts with limited resources. On the whole, the respondents exhibited concern about the hiring process, but provided little data that demonstrated an effort to improve the process. One member admitted, "It is entirely the school board's fault for failing to hire good people." The primary change relating to hiring appeared to relate to visiting the applicant's current or previous school district.

Conclusions

Clearly, it is difficult to become an effective school when the school is constantly experiencing a change in leadership. Certainly not all of the superintendents were terminated or forced to resign. Many did so for health or age reasons. Yet, the fact remains that each of the identified schools had at least three superintendents in five years. There must be a degree of stability in schools if the schools are to succeed in their mission of educating all children.

All of the board presidents interviewed recognized the need for this stability. Some felt the situation of constant turnover could be resolved if more money could be offered to the potential superintendent. Others believed that the problem was with the interview process and the need to structure it in a manner that didn't focus just on bird hunting and girls basketball. A few boards had started to remedy the situation by investigating the applicant more thoroughly. However, a constant irritation for the board

presidents was the inability to get useful answers regarding the superintendent applicants from the State Department of Education and State School Boards Association. The board presidents indicated that every superintendent, even those who were disasters to the districts, were given a good recommendation by the two agencies. Board presidents were continually frustrated at these agencies for their lack of assistance.

It appears that possible solutions to the high rate of turnover of the superintendents must come from several sources. First, boards must be more investigative in the hiring process. One board member indicated that the board had finally hired an individual that no one really wanted after several other applicants had refused the position. This desire to fill the position with a warm body must cease. Good people must be actively pursued and hired. The interview process must become more than a good old boy meeting.

The state agencies responsible for certification of school administrators must adopt a proactive attitude and address the issue of ineffective administrators. Those superintendents who are dishonest or immoral need to be dealt with firmly by the state. Both the school boards association and the state department need to monitor and provide direct assistance to those schools experiencing excessive turnover. This assistance may be specific training for the school boards in question or the assignment of a

state ombudsman to assist schools with such problems. The schools in question can never function effectively without good leadership. The school board, the community, and the school staff must work together to insure that this happens. Then, and only then, will the children of each school district receive the education they deserve.

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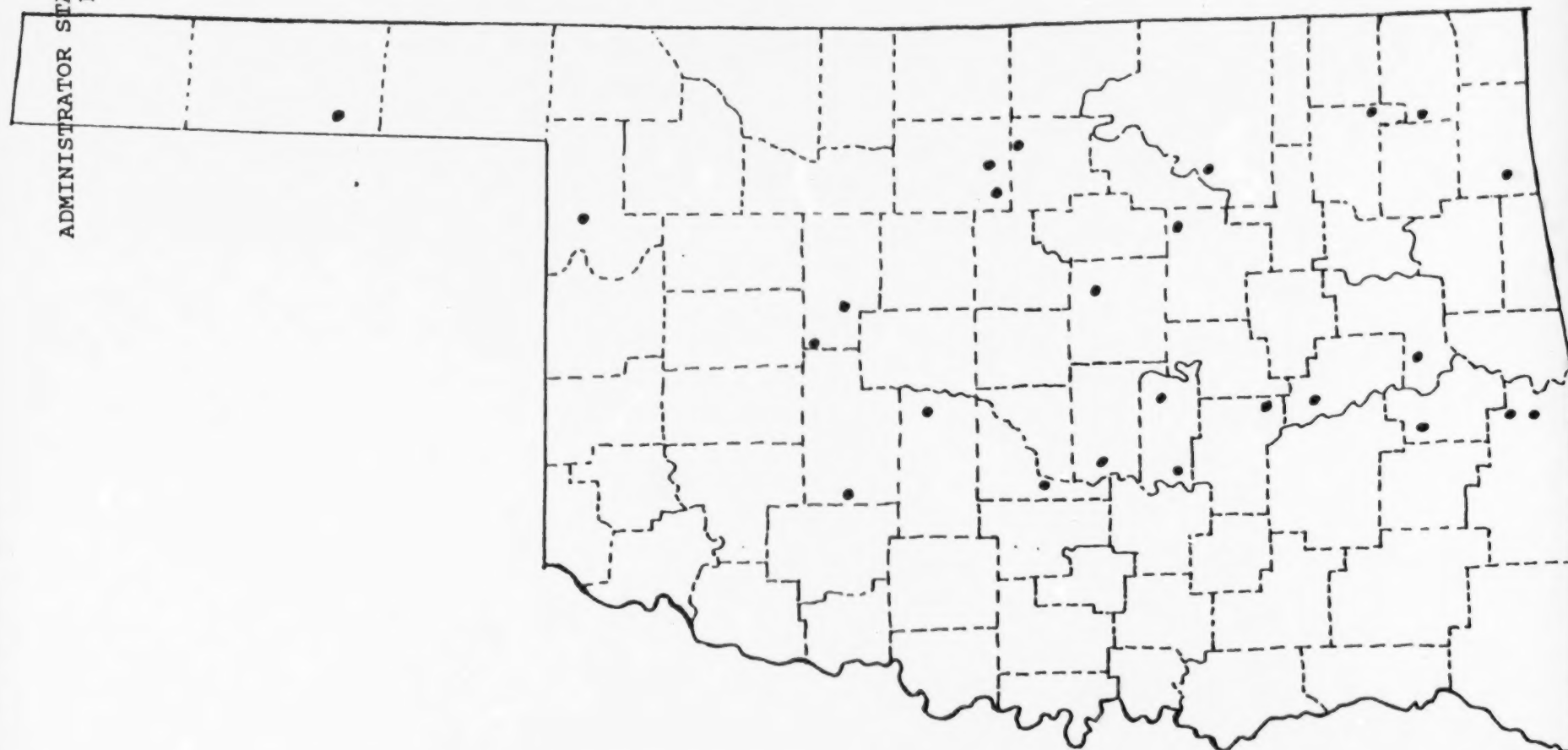
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TABLE 1
OCCUPATIONS OF SCHOOL BOARD PRESIDENTS

RANCHER/FARMER
OIL AND GAS
INSURANCE AGENT
POSTMASTER
TEACHER ASSISTANT
CARPENTER
BANK CASHIER
TECHNICAL ENGINEER
CONSTRUCTION
CLAIMS EXAMINER
CIVIL SERVICE
STEEL FABRICATOR
STORE OWNER
RETIRED

FIGURE 1



LOCATION OF SCHOOL BOARD INTERVIEWEES

TABLE II

REASONS FOR SUPERINTENDENT TURNOVER
AS INDICATED BY SCHOOL BOARD PRESIDENTS

